Whitesnake: on the ladder

HIRO OHNO

FIN COSTELLO

DAVID COVERDALE and (inset) JON LORD

When David Coverdale enticed Jon Lord out of comfortable retirement, they decided to avoid the traps which snared Deep Purple. In Paris, RAY COLEMAN watched them join heavy metal's second coming.

AFTER 16 years on the road, Jon Lord might be forgiven tonight for feeling at best world-weary, at worst bitter.

In 1975, as keyboardist with the mighty Deep Purple, he faced a crowd of 400,000 for rock's biggest-ever one-day concert, the California Jam at the Ontario Motor Speedway; but tonight, at Paris Olympia Stadium, only a few hundred rabid heavy metal freaks have shown up for the opening shot in a mini-European tour by Whitesnake, the nearest to a reincarnation of Purple we shall see.

And yet . . . the gig's a knockout. The warmth and rapport of a small but committed crowd inspired the band to a classic performance. Here was the best of British heavy metal — and something of a statement of renaissance, a clarion call to all those musicians branded "boring old farts" by over-zealous lesser talents.

"Old — yes. Boring — no," says Lord before going on stage. He's 36 now, battle-scarred but still smiling from a career which began with the ArtWoods and took Deep Purple to the dizzy heights.

With no need for money after the demise of Purple in 1976, Lord vegetated for two years before being persuaded to go back to the roots by ex-Purple singer David Coverdale, the instigator of Whitesnake.

This, says Lord, will be his last time with a band. Coverdale, at 27, is more aggressively ambitious, determined not to sail back to the top merely on the back of Purple — they purposely avoided using the name again, in spite of lucrative American offers to re-form under the old tag.

"The trouble with Purple," says Coverdale, "is that we knew too bloody well how good we were. Ultimately, we self-destructed. Egos came into play at the end. It wasn't a pretty split . . . relations became sour between all of us. Actually, it was disgusting."

THE music of Whitesnake, and the conviction of their performance, should ensure them a massive audience of both old and new fans.

If Coverdale and Lord form the nucleus, offering powerful credentials, the other four musicians provide a potent backbone, with Micky Moody's withering slide guitar solo running a stylish (and technically stunning) gamut from country to rock; Bernie Marsden's guitar-work rock-solid, laying down a good foundation; Dave Dowle's drums, rather under-miked but energetic and right for the framework of the songs; and Neil Murray's bass — innovative, jazz-inflected and a testimony to his good reputation from spells with National Health and Colosseum II.

For all the band's superficial joie de vivre, their nagging worries are articulated by Murray. On the coach to the gig, he said: "Years ago, there were ground rules. The promoters knew there was an audience for our music, which is hard rock fused with heavy metal, and we all went out and played the stuff which was expected of us. We filled a slot. Now, I'm not so sure. The field's been clouded by the punk thing.

"What I want to know is: who are our audience now? Are they old hippies? Or are all those old fans now at home watching TV? Are we going to pull in the kids It's an interesting time for this comeback, if that's what it is."

And yet there's a strong feeling around that Whitesnake will collect. It's in the bones of the musicians and those near them, even though the spectre of Purple guitar ace Ritchie Blackmore and Rainbow hovers, threatening to confuse the issue. Relations between Coverdale, Lord and Blackmore are professionally cordial, but a good, old-fashioned personal needle-match remains.

More confusion: ex-Purple singer Ian Gillan is on the road with his band, while their former drummer Ian Paice is, if not on the road, about to re-enter the fray.

Still, the music has it in the end, and this act compresses the brashest of macho rock into a sound that is impressively mind-numbing. Decibels aren't its only strength; although light and shade aren't one of Whitesnake's assets, their expertise at delivering raging excitement is terrific.

THE electricity between veterans like Coverdale and Lord and the other less historically successful figures in Whitesnake makes for a perfect blend of experience and naivété. It's actually Coverdale's band, and they went through a period of being called David Coverdale's Whitesnake. This was rejected because, in the singer's words, it was more like a travel advertisement, too much of a mouthful.

Coverdale — whose Cinderella rise to the top with Purple, from being discovered in a Redcar boutique, is well-documented — says he hopes he never has to stamp his feet and lay down the law. But he would, if necessary.

"The point is," he says, "there's a real hunger in this band, and that's why I feel assured that we're gonna go all the way. All I could offer Lordy, when he came back, was good music and the chance to get back to the roots after that terrible Hollywood-with-long-hair trip which was a natural evolution for bands like Purple, but ultimately destructive."

In this turbulent era of rock, what kind of audience will the band draw? "Lots of people will come out of curiosity, and we'll get some followers of Ritchie Blackmore's Raincoat — and, naturally, old Purple fans. I don't really mind who they are as long as they come not expecting us to recreate all the old stuff. We do 'Mistreated,' a song of mine, but it's a fresh version, and not much more Purple repertoire. All I know is that if we get the people inside the halls, we're OK. The rest is up to us, and I KNOW we're good enough to give 'em a good night of rock 'n' roll.

"We do not ignore the audience. After the show, we give ourselves 45 minutes to cool off and then start inviting the audience into our dressing-room for beers and autographs. Music to me has always been about communication — and during those four years with Purple I didn't meet anyone! The gig, hotel room, limousine, the airport. It was ridiculous.

"All that made the musicians very sheltered, and last year, when we started doing small British gigs, it seemed natural to talk to the kids. I don't like the idea of just communicating for those two hours on stage — and I try to answer as many letters as humanly possible. This level of being a musician is one of the new pleasures to me and the rest of the band."

MENTION of Ritchie Blackmore's name evokes a wry, knowing look from Coverdale and Lord. While there's genuine admiration for his ability as a guitarist, Coverdale spurns the route Ritchie has taken.

"I think he's become the Frank Sinatra of rock 'n' roll," says Coverdale. "I think he believes his own press releases. He's playing things exactly the same as he did five or ten years ago. He doesn't seem to be progressing in any way. I believe he's short-selling himself. When he did the first Rainbow album, I thought he was going to do a Beck number and show off his versatility, because he's an amazing, staggering musician. But no. He's more an entertainer, now, than a musician. Very few people can touch him at what he does, but his biggest problem is his attitude."

Hunger is the word Coverdale constantly reiterates. It was missing in Purple at the end, he says, and it's within all those in Whitesnake right now. He says he had very lucrative offers to join many top hard rock bands, but he wanted his own creation too badly, and his timing appears to have been immaculate.

He lived before forming the band in Munich, where he drowned his sorrows in too much beer during the punk explosion. The music papers, full of the new names, were like foreign publications to him, but he saw the value of the old guard being shaken to the foundations, and he welcomed the better talents like Elvis Costello, Boomtown Rats and Ian Dury — "they helped people who'd come up, like me, to get off the Chesterfield settees and get back to the roots of rock 'n' roll.

"And it brought identity back. Any kid in the streets going to a Zeppelin concert or a Rainbow concert or one of ours couldn't hope to be on that stage with, say, £10,000-worth of gear and clothes like that. The new rock kids took it all back to where it belonged, and for that we should all be glad."

A blunt, brash Yorkshireman, Coverdale writes songs prolifically and — surprisingly, perhaps, in view of the stance of Whitesnake — he makes great play on his songs needing to TOUCH the listener.

"I'm more interested in touching 200 people, really, than selling two million albums, although I'd be a liar if I said I didn't like the bread," he said, and he meant it. "This band can go all the way, but look — I played to huge crowds and saw only a few faces in the front row. Where's the pleasure in that?"

Money, he says, has broken more bands than it should have. "A lot of superstar set-ups are ruined by the guy with a name keeping a large percentage of the points and not sharing. The only way I can get these boys to give 100 per cent. of themselves is to give 100 per cent to them. We're all on the same money — Lordy ain't getting any more than me, and the guitarists aren't either, or the drummer. It's a democratic set-up, financially, and in the end it will pay off. A lot of people think I'm silly, but I'd like to prove them wrong."

IF Coverdale is the heart and lungs of Whitesnake, Jon Lord is the spinal cord. Coverdale had immense difficulty in finding a keyboardist until last August ("I tried out lots of boys who seemed to think we played everything in E."). Lord, who had been mentally stagnating at his 14-acre Goring-on-Thames home, was asked if he would join and, in the words of manager John Coletta, "his eyes began to sparkle."

Lord, inactive for two years, says he had started "that slippery, fateful trip downwards, feeling sorry for myself, complemented by the fact that I had no money problems so didn't need to work. I was almost worried to step outside my front room, but something made me realise that I just had to go back to the road. The road! After 16 years, and the Purple trip which elevated us so high, I just had to get back and play small halls again."

Intuitively, he believed heavy metal music was not going to be usurped by the new wave, even though he, too, saw the validity in tearing down the "boring old licks" and encouraging young players. Purple had died partly because "there was a dichotomy between what Ritchie Blackmore wanted and what I wanted — although there were concerts when the music gained a lot from that tension between us."

Yes, he felt old, but not without energy — and certainly he was enjoying the music.

"Punk produced some amazing bands and a lot of dross — but hasn't that always been the case? I think we all deserved that lot coming full steam at all of us. Too many rock stars had got fat on it and started breeding dogs and investing in the motor cycle business. I think the music demands total commitment, and there's an unspoken contract with the public to give it your whole working life, if you're in it at all."

Commercially and artistically, Lord is convinced that Whitesnake and several other top hard rock heavy metal bands are in for a renaissance.

"The music's always been good, and whatever else the punk thing did that was good, they can't take away from us that we're good musicians and we give a good show. A whole league of people like me are realising that it's time to shed that self-satisfied expression on our faces, not bask in the glory of what's gone down before, and get out in front of the people."

It's impossible not to be impressed by Whitesnake: by the positive attitude of warhorses like Coverdale and Lord, and by the fire and tightness of the music. They'll go all the way.